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“Every religion is a way to God”: Did the Pope Depart from Catholic Teaching?

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Some have felt that the Pope's statement that “all religions are paths to God” is a pluralist heresy that departs from Catholic teaching. However, the Catholic Church teaches that both other religions and non-religious beliefs, may be ways that people are seeking and finding God. His words were daring, but seen in the context of previous Popes, Councils, and theologians, entirely orthodox.

COMMENTARY

Amidst the great joy amongst Catholics and non-Catholics who attended the Pope's visit to Singapore and the wider region, considerable controversy has been stoked by some words uttered by Francis at his final engagement, an interreligious dialogue with youth at Catholic Junior College, Singapore.

Some see the Pope's words as departing from Catholic teaching, while others see them as being in accord with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and other official pronouncements. Some context and framing are necessary to see that the Pope offered no major theological departure from his predecessors, nor the official Catholic teaching.

The Theology of Religions

Some technical terms from the theology of religions – the area of systematic theology that explores how Christians understand religious diversity – will be helpful. A typical typology divides Christian approaches to other religions into three types: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. In recent decades, a new postmodern approach, termed particularist, has also arisen amongst some theologians, but heavily critiqued, it has fallen from favour but still surfaces in debates.

The three terms are quite descriptive, and while there are various nuances, we can gloss them briefly: exclusivists believe that only Christianity is true, while other religions actively take people away from God with false teachings; inclusivists believe that while they have the whole truth, other religions have some partial truth that leads people towards God; and pluralists assert that there are many equal paths towards God.

Catholic and Biblical Teaching

Since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, the Catholic Church has been inclusivist, with this stance endorsed in the important documents *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium*. Before this, an official church teaching that nobody outside the church can be saved was exclusivist, though most significant theologians and church teachers were inclusivists. Both these approaches can be read in various parts of the Bible, with St Paul's teaching seemingly inclusivist and parts of the Hebrew text seemingly exclusivist.

Pluralism, as a distinct approach, arose in Christianity in the late Twentieth Century but has echoes in church history and the Bible. Many, for instance, would be surprised to discover that the Bible describes a Zoroastrian monarch as (the/a) Christ, using the same title applied to Jesus. It has, however, not been mainstream, and figures such as Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, issued condemnations against pluralism. However, what was condemned was relativism which says every religion is the same, which no serious pluralist theologian endorses anyway. This is different from what Francis said.

The ground is complicated because, for almost all of Church history, it has been an acceptable belief that everyone will be saved. One early teacher of this was St Gregory of Nyssa, one of the greatest teachers of the Christian tradition. More recently, the conservative Twentieth Century Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (a favourite of Benedict XVI) has also taught this.

What the Pope Said in Context

The Pope's phrase that we should not describe any religion as false but all as true has, perhaps, been the most quoted and debated. In his words: "all religions are paths to God". He also compared all religions to languages talking about God and said that every one of them provides a way to God.

Some have seen the Pope as a pluralist and departing from Catholic teaching by saying this. However, a few points are in order. In line with universalist teaching, Francis may be stressing that every path humans take may be a pathway to God. Benedict XVI actually said that agnostics may be closer to God than many within the Church because they seriously ask questions of faith and God's existence rather than taking it as routine.

The former Pope, now Saint, John Paul II, also said there should be "mutual respect", seemingly downplaying doctrinal differences, when meeting Buddhists and Christians in dialogue. He famously held the first Assisi Day of Prayer in 1986, bringing members of many religions together to pray for peace. Then Cardinal Ratzinger stayed away

from this event, seen as a sign of disapproval, but as Benedict XVI, he assembled and led a second Assisi Day of Prayer in 2002 and invited an atheist speaker as part of the line-up of leaders.

Francis' words, especially as he is more of a pastoral leader than a theological speculator, seem very much in accord with the words and actions of his predecessors. Moreover, by stressing that everyone was on a path to God, mentioning one God, not many, may well indicate that he, in line with Catholic teaching, sees everyone as converging, if they come in goodwill, towards Jesus and God.

In Catholic tradition, the important Twentieth Century theologian Karl Rahner, whose work has often been seen as defining the meaning of the Second Vatican Council, used the phrase "anonymous Christians" to mean that anyone within their own religion (or with Benedict, including non-religion) is seeking God in their heart when they act rightly. This accords with the inclusivist teachings of St Paul and the early Christian Father Justin Martyr in the Second Century, who saw Jesus as the Word (Logos) in "Pagans" when they spoke well.

Pluralist or Inclusivist? The Courage to Speak

Any competent theologian should be clear that while daring – and in that same speech, Francis urged courage to engage in dialogue – nothing Francis said went against Catholic teaching. Of course, one could quote particular phrases from Church documents or theologians and say that word for word, Francis' words appear to be out of sync. For instance, the document *Domine Iesus* describes non-Christian religions as "gravely deficient". Francis may also, as a Jesuit theologian, be using language that attracts people to the Church's message, even if it may not seem to match traditional language. Yet, it may fully accord with traditional teaching if understood correctly.

Neither theology nor Christian faith has ever been about spouting particular dogmas or verbal formulas to make one close to God (although, at times, Christians have regrettably acted and behaved as if this were true). As Benedict said, somebody within the Church can be far from God, and somebody not technically within the Church may be near God, even if they do not even fully profess God's existence.

Some may use Francis' words as a way to attack the Pope, to attack Catholics, or to attack the practice of interreligious dialogue. I suggest, however, that people of goodwill, those seeking the common good of all, as Francis continually urges, should focus upon his call for courage in this same speech. People may twist your words or seek to attack your motives.

However, interreligious dialogue and mutual coexistence across boundaries of religion and non-religion are, arguably, too important to be discouraged by critical naysayers. Jesus said that many would call his name, but he would not know them. Likewise, people who demand certain doctrinal words, or claim the name of Jesus or other religious leaders to attack others, are not the only voices of religion. Therefore, take courage and remember that the vocation of dialogue is, for Catholics and many others, an important and holy work.

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